Winning Success Through Flexible Organizational Culture: A Qualitative Research Of A Pakistani Corporation

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Abstract

This paper aims to dig out the impact of flexible organizational culture on the success of a firm in contemporary Pakistan. According to the 2022 organizational culture research report "66% of executives believe culture is more important than an organization's business strategy or operation model" (Global Culture Survey 2021-PwC). Considering the value of this issue, this paper is going to uncover the characteristics of a hybrid-flexible organizational culture that emerge when US based human resource management practices are utilized to organize local workforce. The key focus is on how this culture influences employees' behaviour and organizational performance. Quite a lot of research is available on organizational culture and its impact, however this particular angle of hybrid-flexible culture is overlooked. Consistently, this paper is going to fill this lacuna between research and practice and contributes to the body of knowledge. By foreseeing the demand of in-depth data to effectively handle this issue, qualitative research has been conducted to explore the complex relationship between flexible organizational culture and the market success of an organization.

Keywords: Flexible-hybrid organizational culture, adaptation, organizational success, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Pakistani businessmen (like many from other developing countries) show great enthusiasm in replicating US management and human resource management practices to actively participate in the changing market without recognizing the issue of cultural differences (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). However, the use of US-American Human Resource Management practices to organize local workforces has created a very complex situation for both managers as well as employees. The intricacy centers to the point on how to develop a flexible workplace environment where employees can enjoy being themselves while focusing on meeting the requirements of their job. It has been argued that organizational culture has a strong impact on the performance and effectiveness of organizations, and received considerable attention from researchers (Cameron & Freeman, 1991; Dennison, 1990; Dennison & Mishra, 1995; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; O'Rilley, 1989; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1991). However almost all of this research focuses on developed countries, particularly the North American context. A number of authors have openly questioned the relevance of US-American theories to different national contexts (Adler, 2002s; Gelfand et al., 2007; Hofstede, 1980;

Kanungo & Jaeger, 1990; Luthans, 1998; Trompenaars, 1997). Therefore, there is a need to study the relationship between organizational culture and organizational success in the transitory economies. Consistent with this background, this paper explores the relationship between hybrid-flexible organizational culture and organizational success in Pakistan. Like the businessmen of many other developing countries, Pakistani businessmen are trying to compete in the globalized market with the help of Western and in particular North American management techniques (Saher& Mayrhofer, 2014; Tayeb, 1998). It is worth mentioning here that organizational success is taken as the capacity of an organization to maintain itself in the market and persistently ensure its market share. To better address the requirement of this research, a qualitative research approach was employed to get an in-depth understanding of the complex relationship between organizational culture and market success. In this regard, an intensive case study was conducted of a local corporation, Healing Ltd. (HL). This firm was actively striving to participate in the global economy and implement North American HRM practices. During the field work, multiple research methods were used to get an in-depth understanding of organizational phenomena as recommended by previous researchers (Aycan, 2000; Cassell & Symon, 1994; D'Iribarne, 1997; Forster, 1994; Marshall, 1994; Mayer & Tuma, 1990). The employees from human resource management development departments were the focus of this research, due to their position as moderators of organizational change (see Kochan & Dyer, 1993). The main goal of this paper is to explore how a hybrid flexible organizational culture contributes to achieve organizational goals. In this regard, we attempt to identify the ways that both management and employees cope with conflicting assumptions of local and organizational systems, and culturally and professionally prescribed role expectations

(based on individualism, equality and gender egalitarianism versus collectivism, power distance and gender segregation). In view of this background, the first section of this paper presents literature review to develop a theoretical background of the relationship between national and organizational culture, followed by a discussion on prevailing socio-cultural values in Pakistan. In the later section, research methods and findings will be discussed, the discussion will focus on the relationship between flexible organization culture and organizational success.

2. Literature Review

Organizational culture is the collective behavior of employees of an organization. It is formed by the organizational values, visions, norms, working language, systems, and symbols. It is also the set of such collective behaviors and assumptions that are taught to new organizational members as a way of perceiving, and feeling (Schein, 1992). Organizational culture affects the way people and groups interact with each other, with clients, and with other stakeholders. The relationship between national and organizational culture remains the focus of intellectual debate and yet there is no consensus. One stream of the literature has established that both the concepts, national and organizational cultures, are different constructs that are based on distinctive contents (Aycan et al., 2000; Bartunek, 1984; Hofstede et al., 1990; Sackmann, 1992; Chatman and Jehn, 1994; Numic, 2008). Hofstede validated this stance with the results of a study carried out across 20 Danish and Dutch organizational units (Hofstede et al., 1990). The research results highlighted that cultures of the organizations vary at explicit levels (symbols, heroes and rituals); whereas national cultures mostly diverge at the implicit level (values). Later Chatman and Jehn (1994) established that organizational cultures are based on stable dimensions that diverge more across industries than within the firms. However, Sackmann (1992) argued that organizational

culture is a more complex phenomenon, with various subcultures existing within organizations. In line with this perspective, Numic (2008) contended that organizations with employees from third country, host country and parent country nationals can change organizational cultures and in turn develop a unique culture to cater the needs of the diverse employees. This course of literature proposes differentiation between national culture and organizational culture. On the other hand, the proponents of another stream argue that researchers exploring organizational culture without incorporating national culture develop ethnocentric approaches that are not relevant in different national contexts (Weber, 1996). They believe that organizations are deep-rooted in national cultural contexts, which influences organizational understanding. They argued that differences in organizational cultures partly drive from national differences (Zellmer-Bruhn et al., 2001; Cooper et al., 2001). As cultural values play a crucial role in the way social institutions function (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007). Organizations reflect national cultural values and beliefs in its culture in order to attain social legitimacy and function effectively in the society (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007). In line with this perspective, it is not possible to understand the relationship between an organizational culture and its performance without incorporating the national culture (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Meyer, 1994; England, 1983). Aycan (2002) states that cultural contingencies particularly influence the formal characteristics of an organization, with a direct and indirect effect of national culture on organizational outcomes. Specifically, nationally shared values, norms, practices and beliefs have a strong impact on managerial and interpersonal characteristics such as job design, team work, human resource management, communication, participation and leadership. Indeed, researchers have revealed that organizational cultures reflecting national cultural patterns produce high job satisfaction (Lincoln et al., 1981), better decision-making (Misumi, 1984) and overall effectiveness (Ferris & Wagner, 1985). In the same way, Tayeb (1995) has argued that successful organizational cultures necessarily display characteristics of the national value system. Many recent studies have reported the impact of national culture on human resource management practices and organizational performance (Anakwe, 2002; Ayacan, 2001; Budhwar & Khatri, 2001; Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002; Dalton, 2007; Debrah & Budhwar, 2008; Davila & Elvira, 2005; Jackson et al., 2008; Khilji, 2003; Lisa, 2006; Mariappanadar, 2005; Siengthai & Bechter, 2005; Wocke et al., 2007). However, the current research is unique in drawing evidence about the way flexible-hybrid organizational culture influences organizational performance in Pakistan, which so far has been overlooked. This phenomenon occurs when unique organizational value systems are developed as a result of efforts to consider national culture while following economic ideology (for details see Ralston et al., 1997, p. 183). Some researchers such as Sinha et al. (1999) view this phenomenon as an indigenization process. Sinha et al., (1999) maintains, "indigenization implies that what are useful and valuable in the two systems in the contemporary context are retained and integrated to generate a synergistic work culture that is not only congruent with socio-cultural realities but also functional and effective" (p. 22).

Theory clearly offers that organizational culture affects the conduct of the workforce (Schein, 1985). This is because individuals act in line with their values; and organizational culture is a collection of shared values. Thus, organizational cultures should develop behavioral expectancies that are consistent with the surrounding culture (Fey & Denison, 2000). This 'fit' between organizational culture and its environment highlights the significance of organizational flexibility to adapt to achieve its goals (Kotter &

Heskett, 1992). It is proposed that organizations remain effective when they can resolve the contradictions between internal integration and external adaptation (Hatch, 1993). Schein's (1985) model of organizational culture, consisting of three layers, artifacts, values, and assumptions/belief/ tacit level (for details see Schein, 1985), can help to study how conflicting situations and expectations are managed in organizations. The artifacts (or symbols) being the most visible part of the organization can facilitate the study of organizational culture (Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). In this field, most studies focus on ergonomics (Rafaeli & Worline, 2000); and various researches have highlighted the influence of spatial design on social interaction, affective reaction and behavioral control as well as job performance (Baron, 1994; Davis, 1984; Goodrich, 1982; Marans & Spreckelmeyer, 1982; Oldham et al., 1995). In our study of a local Pakistani enterprise, we will study the organizational culture by focusing on questions like; how do employees maintain conflicting demands of local social values and US based HR practices in the firm? How do employees establish close but modest male-female interactions to effectively meet the requirement of their jobs contributing to organizational success?

It is important here to have a brief view of Pakistani cultural values to comprehend how management and employees try to develop an organizational culture that satisfies official requirements while being congruent with social values. Pakistani culture has been portrayed as a culture of collective self-identity (Lyon, 2002), stratification / inequality and female segregation (Lyon, 2002). Khilji (2004: 115) argues that 'the social setup is family centered' and therefore family patterns; its roles, assumptions, and networks are explicitly reflected in almost all institutions of Pakistani society. Male and female domains and roles are clearly differentiated, as in many other developing countries (Aycan, 2002; Kanungo & Jaeger, 1990). The female role is primarily defined within home (Guney et al., 2006). In the asymmetrical structure of family, the eldest male is assumed to be the head of the family, and the status of female members comes after even the youngest male members (Lyon, 2002). Therefore, female mobility and female-male interaction is avoided as much as possible. Social mechanisms exist to neutralize the sensitivity of unavoidable situations in which this occurs. For example, kin roles are transposed to non-kin (Lyon, 2002). This phenomenon of establishing family-like relationships with non-kin is institutionalized. Lyon (2002) contends, 'Pakistani employ very fundamental role relationships which are learnt in the security of kin groups to deal with situations in which there is no market, political or other structural security' (Lyon, 2002: 228). In line with the debate, the ingrained principles of Pakistani societal culture also appear to influence employee and employer relations in Pakistan, as despite a limited relationship, employees maintain 'certain social expectations especially at time of crisis from their employer which are not part of ideal capitalistic labor relations' (Lyon, 2002: 123). These expectations become more visible and strategic when work relations grow close because in this situation the idiom of family is brought to the fore (Lyon, 2002). In other words, 'labor relationships in Pakistan are not exclusively economic work contracts; they are significant social bonds' (Lyon, 2002, p. 123). Research revealed the existence of this kind of social commitment among the workers and its impact on the human resource management practices (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Khilji, 2003). This highlights the relevance of local cultural values to contemporary organizations working in Pakistan as highlighted by Gelfand et al., (2007) to better understand organizational culture and employee behavior in Pakistani Firms.

3.   Research Methods

Qualitative research methodology was employed and a case study of a firm Healing Ltd. (HL), was conducted. Multiple research methods like in-depth interviews, key informants, individual case studies, and document analysis were used to collect field data. In this regard, five (5) key informants were selected based on their interest in the research, willingness to provide information and availability. Thirty (30) in- depth interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide. Ten (10) case studies, personal as well as situational, were also carried out to gather a more in-depth in sight of the issue at hand. Situational case studies (in which a situation was studied as a case) helped to understand an issue with the help of changing situational contexts (see Pan and Tan, 2011). Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data in accordance with the method proposed by Leedy and Ormrod (2001) and Mayring (2007). At the first level, the data was synthesized by forming matrices to develop themes from the document analysis and in-depth interviews as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Later they were content analyzed in a consistent manner with reference to the history and the context of Healing Ltd. (HL). On the basis of this process, the data was interpreted and results were compiled.

4.   Results and Discussion

The firm studied was Public Limited Company (Ltd.). The field data also identified that organizational structure was based on the logic of central authority. The formal logic of authority was that the firm's direction was led from the top-down, while reporting moved from the bottom-up. Whilst this seemed quite clear and simple, actualizing this logic was not very simple in practice.

The field observations unraveled the influence of local traditions on the authority system. It was gathered from various sources (e.g., key informants, extended case studies, situational case studies and participant observation) that mutual and reciprocal cultural obligations and personal penetrations transformed this one-way bureaucratic system into a more dynamic, comprehensive and 'holistic' approach leading to success of the firm. The field data revealed that this approach helped management to see things in a broader perspective and address business issues in a more comprehensive manner. For instance, a key informant disclosed that a hierarchical system with reciprocal obligations and personal penetrations developed a flexible mechanism for effectively handling workforce and clients, exhibiting vibrant shades in accordance with the demands of the situation. The in-depth interviews with the managers and supervisors disclosed that the flexibility of the system helped them to handle difficult situations with the help of their socially related colleagues and loyal workers; and thus achieve their performance targets.

The organization reflected, as the researchers witnessed in the field, a flexible environment with modern impressions and the local considerations to run an international standard organization in Pakistan. The senior management consciously invested resources to establish and maintain a notion of modesty, as it helped them to attract clients especially from middle and upper class. As depicted by the field data, the organizational layout, decor, clinic setup, rules and regulations, and employees' uniform were designed to create a modern impression on target clients; however, practically processes were managed in accordance with local trend.

4.1 Organizational culture

There is sufficient evidence in the field data to argue that HRM practices were contextually

redefined in accordance with the local cultural values and norms. The societal cultural norm of gender differences was considered while implementing the US lead HR practices- based on equality and gender egalitarianism. Consistent with this background, the organizational culture of HL manifested a continuum of gender differences and egalitarianism. This continuum of gender relations mainly influenced the social environment, employee relations and their behavior in the organization. In order to explore the effect of this continuum on the organizational social environment, we will start by looking at the job space (offices, cabin, desks, work area etc.) and the way it is organized and used. We will also try to explain the strategies to consciously maintain the personal distance between the male-female colleagues at the workplace. We will then highlight the ways that colleagues (male to male, female to female and male to female) socialized on gender specific values transposed kin roles onto non kin to perform their official responsibilities.

Field data revealed that the job space and workplace layout was consciously designed in HL to make the best use of the workers' potential whilst facilitating them to be at ease in accordance with local standards. The field data revealed that senior management of HL was eager to create a modern (liberal, westernized) impression on its clients. Therefore, the front desks with female workers or both male and female workers were a typical feature which was supposed to reflect the image of gender egalitarian-modern organization. Yet, close observation revealed that generally male workers were given the task to handle clients but depending upon the nature of the situation, female workers may be appointed to sit alongside them on the front desks. For example, on the front desk of the rear side entrance, females were appointed to receive clients because this entrance was mainly used by the seriously ill patients and

their relatives. On the other hand, the front desk team of the main entrance consisted of both female and male employees to cater the needs of diverse clients reflecting a modern image of the organization. Significantly, on patient registration counters only male employees were deputed. This clearly reflects that allocation of the workforce in HL was designed to create a gender-egalitarian impression, as well as enabling the effective handling of diverse situations. The point to be highlighted is that the blended practices regarding job space were only used in client areas in order to create a modest impression to attract more clients. Otherwise depending upon the situation, different logic was employed to serve the interests of HL. As a matter of fact, being a business firm, the priority of HL management was to satisfy clients and maximize profit via smooth functioning, which required good interpersonal relationships within the workforce. Therefore, various combinations of diffused and local assumptions were used to effectively cater the diverse expectations of clients to successfully achieve the goals of the firm.

Employee Interaction in HL, as witnessed in the field, closely-knit teams of workers (males and females) mutually shared responsibilities and reciprocally supported each other. The employees informally classified themselves into various groups of friends who maintained strong obligatory relationships as the social norm of Pakistani society besides having moderate exchange expectations with all. The field data disclosed that these informal groups might consist of all males, all females and both- males and females. Yet, indigenous spirit of mutual interaction and exchange (within particular groups) is visible in these social circles, at all the levels and in all the departments. It was also witnessed among employees in the HR department. The HR employees classified themselves into various levels of obligatory

social circles: strong obligations and feeble obligations. In the HR department, these informal groups were composed of all male members, all female members and both - males and females; although, very few women develop close relations with male colleagues. Male family members of the female worker like brother, father or husband, as witnessed in the field by the researchers, would interact with the male colleague/s and in a way authenticate their relation.

Field data revealed that married women with kids were more social than the unmarried or married (but without kids) women to establish and maintain obligatory relationships with male colleagues. These colleagues transpose familial roles to interact free but normatively. For example, an elderly helpful boss is taken as a fatherly figure or elder brother; colleagues of the same age taken as sister/brother, younger male/female colleagues are treated as younger brother/sister and others. This transformation allowed male-female employees to freely interact with each other and satisfy the more flexible behavioral demands of their jobs within a medical corporation that was trying to improve itself according to international standards.

Here the point to be highlighted is that the close interaction among the male-female employees in HL, which apparently seemed similar to western egalitarian practices, was not similar. It is based on the local social norm of transposing the kin roles on the non-kin allowing close male-female interaction to satisfy the exceptional requirements of some situations. The field data has also revealed that HL management acknowledged the value of this phenomenon (maintaining personal distance in male-female employees' relations) as it saved them from many problems faced by almost all the Western/modern organizations, such as 'employee sexual harassment' (Luthans, 2008). There is sufficient

evidence in the field to infer that HL's social environment was not like Western organizations. It was also different from the social scenario prevailing outside HL and in the society. It actually depicted the cross-vergence between the indigenous moralities and diffused management model. Therefore, the new inductees always faced problems to adjust themselves into the prevailing system of HL. The field data also revealed that those well-adjusted employees in HL developed performing teams contributing to the success of the corporation.

4.2 Organizational Success

An important aspect in the study of organizational culture is its impact on an organization's performance and market success. The field data supported that this particular organization performed very well: HL had developed its brand name and there was good demand for HL in the job market. It was noted that the professionals were even interested to join at comparatively lower salary packages with longer working hours. Field data further highlighted that a good number of fresh graduates from various universities would like to join for internships with the expectations that its work experience inculcated self-confidence, communication skills and professional grooming. During the fieldwork, the principal author met with young professionals who were very hopeful that with one to two years' work experience, they might get a very good job in an international private organization with a standard pay package. Discussion with this case study we present an example of an organization in a transitory economy that successfully developed a flexible-hybrid culture that kept the employees in a conducive work environment, facilitating them to work close to develop performing teams in-turn contributing to achieve organizational goals of market success. While its management actively strives to participate in the global economy and

implement North American HRM practices, it also acknowledges local values and indigenous perspectives as demonstrated by its design, job space, maintaining personal distance and employee interactions. Results support the claim that organizations that are deeply rooted in national cultural contexts can better attain their market share (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Weber, 1996; Zellmer-Bruhn et al., 2001). The way in which the organizational culture blended US-based HR practices with visible artifacts and explicit symbols that reflected implicit national cultural values and beliefs demonstrates the relevance of socio-cultural contexts for organizations to have social legitimacy (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2007) and – in turn – to be successful. Field data disclosed that situational considerations and flexibility were critical features of the organizational culture that helped the management to upgrade the indigenous model to satisfy the basic requirement of capitalist market and enable the effective handling of the local workforce. This in turn helped to achieve the organizational targets of profit maximization and market success.

5.   Conclusion

This study has several limitations, so caution is required while generalizing the findings to other Pakistani organizations. First, the basic limitation includes the general requirement of vigilance for the case study approach. Second, the target firm belongs to the service sector and does not involve production activities. Surely, the practices in production sector organization could be different. Similarly, the location of the organization in the capital city of Pakistan has given way to the highest frequency of workforce diversity in the organization which could be somewhat different in a local organization working in the other cities of Pakistan. It would be interesting to learn how organizations in other sectors, regions and industries try to solve different role expectations from the contrast between US political and

economic influence and the local culture. What are the processes and outcomes in organizations that do not follow US HR practices? What procedures and changes would be advisable for organizations that want to become more international and attractive for international clients, customers and sponsors?

This study can – besides its limitations – provide useful insights both for researchers and practitioners specifically in the absence of other studies revealing the impact of flexible-hybrid organizational culture on the success of a corporation in Pakistan. The in-depth data, acquired through an extensive case study of a medical corporation with multiple research methods like participant observation, in-depth interviews, key informants, and situational studies, has provided insight into the ways a Pakistani firm managed to achieve the trust of its clients and survive in the strong competition of the deregulated Pakistani economy. The field data illustrated the ways that conflicting assumptions of Pakistani cultural values (of gender segregation and inequality) were satisfied while following the US HR practices (based on gender egalitarianism and equality), and highlighted the importance of qualitative research design and research methods. This kind of rare in-depth data, revealing the indigenous social mechanisms through which management and workers could maintain a balance between professional and social values is difficult to identify with a quantitative research approach. Further research could explore if and how (hybrid) organizational culture influences individual lifestyle outside the work context and leads to adaptations and behavioral adjustments in other social interactions.

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